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NOFORN
SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [KCRM](#) [PO](#)
SUBJECT: HIJACKED SHIP NOT IN PORTUGUESE WATERS

Classified By: Mario A. Fernandez, Pol-Econ Officer,
reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (S/NF) SUMMARY: Portuguese Navy officials confirmed on August 13 that the Portuguese government was closely monitoring the situation involving the Arctic Sea, a Maltese-flagged, Finnish-owned commercial ship with a Russian crew that "disappeared" July 24 off the coast of Sweden, while reportedly transporting timber from Finland to Algeria. Portuguese Navy officials acknowledged that they knew the Arctic Sea's location in the Atlantic, which they had obtained from the Portuguese Judicial Police, and were prepared to dispatch a frigate, currently on standby, should the Arctic Sea enter Portuguese territorial waters around the Azores, or should it approach Cape Verde and they received an official request from the Cape Verdean government. Separately, the Portuguese MFA told Poloff August 12 that the Arctic Sea was not currently in -- and had not passed through -- Portuguese territorial waters. The MFA further stated that Russia had not officially requested GOP assistance in locating the vessel, as reported by the press. Portuguese Navy imagery as well as U.S. government sources indicate the vessel is currently in the central Atlantic Ocean, steaming south, approximately 1000 miles due west of Mauritania, far from Portugal. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND

12. (S/NF) According to U.S. military sources in Europe, the Arctic Sea, a Maltese-flagged, Finnish-owned commercial ship carrying some 15 Russian crewmembers, disappeared July 24, off the southern coast of Sweden, while delivering timber from Finland to Algeria. On July 28, Oy Solchart, the company that owns the ship, reported the disappearance to the Helsinki Police. There were conflicting reports initially over what exactly had occurred, with some unconfirmed information that the ship had been taken over by 8-12 armed men searching for drugs. There was also a separate report indicating that the ship had been taken over by elements of the Russian mafia, suggesting a compromised drug smuggling operation. However, on August 2, Oy Solchart reported that they had received a call from an "English-speaking man" claiming that the ship had been hijacked by 25 "soldiers," and demanding a 1.5 million Euro ransom. The hijackers subsequently stated that the ship would be sunk if the ransom was not paid. Portuguese Navy imagery as well as U.S. government sources currently place the vessel approximately 1000 miles west of Mauritania, off the western coast of Africa.

ARCTIC SEA NOT IN PORTUGUESE WATERS

13. (C) The Arctic Sea's disappearance triggered a number of reports in the Portuguese press, as well as reports that the Russian government had requested Portuguese assistance, and spawned speculation by some Portuguese officials that the vessel may have been carrying illicit cargo, such as drugs or arms. A Portuguese Navy official was quoted as stating definitively that the Arctic Sea "was not in, and did not cross, waters under Portuguese jurisdiction." The Press Advisor at the Portuguese MFA confirmed to Poloff August 12 that the Russian government had not requested Portuguese assistance, as previously reported, though the Russian Transportation Ministry had contacted its Portuguese counterpart seeking information.

PORTUGUESE FRIGATE ON STANDBY

14. (C) While the Portuguese press reported that the GOP was participating in the search, Portuguese Navy officials told Embassy Lisbon Army Attache August 13 that the Portuguese were not currently involved in any operation. However, they indicated that the Portuguese Navy had placed a frigate on standby should the Arctic Sea enter Portuguese waters around the Azores, or should the vessel approach Cape Verde, and the Cape Verdean government requested assistance. Navy officials further asserted that a Portuguese P-3 aircraft had visually spotted the Arctic Sea days earlier but they were now relying

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on information from the Policia Judiciaria, whom Navy officials speculated were in turn receiving information from U.S. government sources. A briefing provided by the Portuguese Navy suggested that the Arctic Sea had studiously avoided not only Portuguese territorial waters in the Azores, but its Exclusive Economic Zone as well. The Portuguese Navy confirmed press reports that the Russian government had deployed five vessels to the area, and indicated they were also tracking those ships.

COMMENT

15. (C) While the Portuguese government has clearly been following the situation closely, it is unlikely it will play any further role. The Arctic Sea is Finnish-owned, Maltese-flagged, carries a Russian crew, and appears not to have entered Portuguese territorial waters, leaving the Portuguese government with no equities in the matter. Nonetheless, the Portuguese Navy is poised to render assistance if necessary. Embassy DATT has been in communication with the Portuguese Navy and Post will continue to monitor the situation.

For more reporting from Embassy Lisbon and information about Portugal, please see our Intelink site:

<http://www.intelink.sgov.gov/wiki/portal:portugal>
BALLARD